

A MAIDEN EFFORT.

W. C. MORROW.

It is my fortune to read a considerable number of manuscripts, in order to pass a private opinion on them; many of these come from young women, who, I am pleased to see, desire to make something more of themselves than average girls of Society. The relation thus established between the aspirants and me is, of course, confidential; but there is nothing of interest in that. In one case, however, it has developed an extraordinary character, and it came about in the manner following:

Recently I received a sketch from a young lady, who is dainty, modest, talented, and very pretty. She is a student in one of the greater "institutions of learning" in California, and she writes that in the little sketch which she sent me she was merely trying her wings, and that by reason of the somewhat delicate nature of the subject which she treated, she had to impose upon me the strictest obligation of silence regarding its authorship. She adds: "You are well aware of the fact that any public connection of my name with this sketch will ruin me in the estimation of the many who consider it proper to debase art by harnessing it to the conventions which invest a maiden." This is somewhat vague, but I know what she means. I know, too, that her family has a high place in the "social scale" of San Francisco; and it is only in the exercise of a permission from her to secure the publication of the sketch if I consider it worthy, that I introduce it here. While I believe it is a clever piece of work, and, better than that, gives evidence of talent, its interest is strengthened in a peculiar manner by the facts of a sequel which I will add to it, in which I shall introduce a matter that will bring great astonishment to a certain very charming young person in the world. The sketch is as follows:

THE LOST GARTER-BUCKLE.

Muriel Arlington, happy in the possession of an exquisite pair of gold garter-buckles presented on Christmas by her father, feasted her eyes upon the delicate tracery of the graver's point, the fine blue enamel surrounding a dainty cluster of forget-me-nots, and the brilliant little diamond set in the axis of each tiny blossom. While thus she looked she suddenly started, uttered a suppressed cry of horror, and instinctively flung the trinket across the room, for with the shadowy indistinctness and persistent insinuation of a terrifying dream, she had seen staring at her from the buckle the face of a hideous dwarf. It seemed to have started into existence in an instant, and to have leered at her with a grimace. Every one of his features was clear to her eye—enormous ears, one placed higher than the other on the skull; for a nose, two holes in a flat space between eyes and mouth; a vast mouth with a hare-lip disclosing enormous teeth, twisted out of shape; and wild hair falling over fierce, sunken eyes.

There lay the bauble on the carpet of her boudoir, looking as innocent as possible. She reasoned that she must have been mistaken, though what if the goldsmith, either by accident or design, had so cleverly done his work as to make it have a suggestion of this hideous face? Bah! the idea was absurd; Muriel's nerves were unstrung from over-study. It was Sophocles and calculus that had painted the ugly picture on the buckle. Mustering her courage, she picked up the trinket gingerly, looked at it, and saw not the least suggestion of the face.

"I am a goose," she said.

She took it to her dressing-case and picked up its mate. A single glance sent her heart bounding; there looked out at her from this one the handsome face of a young man—a calm, thoughtful, studious face, perfect in feature, manly in expression, and full of the tenderness and strength of gentle masculinity. Eagerly she turned it to throw upon it a stronger light; but with incredible suddenness it disappeared, and no further search would restore it! The other was equally blank. The twin buckles remained in her hands merely an exquisite product of the gold-worker's skill.

"I believe I am going insane," she mused; and

then, sighing wearily, she prepared for her couch, and soon was slumbering.

But what dreams there came! Now they took on the form of a hideous dwarf; again, that of an Adonis. Then gradually the two faces exchanged features, one at a time, making the most grotesque combinations. At one time, the one with the beautiful face was trying to drown her, and the dwarf was risking his life to save her; again, the handsome one was pouring out its heart to her, while the dwarf tried to strangle her. It was a miserable night, and the morning found her ill and nervous. For days she remained unhappy and unstrung. At times she had caught fleeting glimpses of the two faces in her garter-buckles, but they left as suddenly as they came. None other of her school friends could find any suggestion of the faces, but this failed to bring the needed calm to her spirit.

This was more than human flesh could bear. Slowly, but with unflinching steadiness, she drifted away from the clear common sense that had always guided her, and allowed her mind to dwell upon occult things. Out of this mass of dreams and visions came an overwhelming desire to consult some one skilled in occult philosophy; and who better than the quaint, queer, shriveled old Hindu, with his mumblings and mutterings, his strange knowledge of poisons and the stars, his stuffy little room burdened with heavy perfumes and filled with curious things, his white dress and blue turban, his crimson shoes, the peculiar wand which he always carried, the trances into which he fell, and the astonishing revelations he could make—who better than he, Rabaya the Mystic? If he could not lift the veil, so be it; if he could—to Rabaya she went, climbing laboriously to his little rookery in one of the queerest districts of San Francisco, the Latin Quarter.

The little old man, brown and wrinkled, greeted her with profound salaams, eying her closely with sharp glances which issued from deep recesses from underneath his shaggy brows. She told him of her trouble; placed the garter-buckles in his hand; was confused when he asked her which had shown the face of a dwarf and which that of an Adonis, for she had not thought to distinguish them.

"Never mind, my child," he said, "I can decide." With that he went into the strangest trance; his eyes rolled; his nerves trembled; he passed the wand over his forehead.

"It is all clear," he finally said. "This is the one on which the dwarf appears. I place a mark on the silk elastic—thus. Wear that one on your right leg. This other carries the handsome face; wear that on your left leg, to be nearer the heart. Make no mistake, or the whole course of your life will be changed. If you reverse them in wearing, opposing currents will be established; you will feel them in your bones, in your heart, in your brain; for with one of these men the fates have linked you inseparably."

"With which one?" she asked breathlessly. Putting on a queer smile, the old man answered: "I have told you all I may. Be content and watchful, and you need not fear. When peril assails you, then fate, if you have been careful, will solve the problem for you. Meanwhile, lose no time in putting them on. You may step into that closet. Remove them only at night." The mystic eyes rolled vaguely; he trembled. This had a strange effect on Muriel. She caught the occult influence of the surroundings; the heavy perfumes intoxicated her; she gasped for breath and air. Nerving herself to effort, she seized the Mystic by the arm and cried:

"You know something else. You must tell me!"

"I dare not," he whispered.

"You must tell me!" she insisted all the more

urgently, pushing his withered form to the wall. "I can say only that you must not lose one of them, if you value your happiness, if you love your life. More than that I may say not a word." With that he sank in collapse upon a lounge, and closed his eyes.

Muriel hurried to the closet and adjusted the garters, slipped a generous gold piece into the hand of the Hindu, and fled the place. Soon she was aboard the steamer on her way to school; but from the moment when she adjusted the garters she began to feel the strangest sensations. Uncanny flashes swept through her body; peculiar visions of grotesque and handsome faces shaped themselves in the air about her; her temples were bursting, her eyes burned. Just as the steamer touched the Oakland pier an impression assailed her with the force of a blow—*what if she had made a mistake in adjusting the garters?* It was dark in the closet; she had hurried; she had not been careful! Yet he had cautioned her so particularly! "Make no mistake," he had said, "or your whole life will be changed." She surely had made the fatal mistake. She felt the opposing currents in her bones, her heart, and her brain, as he had predicted. To verify or disprove her fear was impossible, for she was now aboard the train. Driven almost mad by her fears, she left the train before it arrived at the final station, ran through the outskirts of the village, and was

seeking to find seclusion among the oaks that lined a small cañon which she knew.

Her mad flight attracted the vicious attention of a dog of great size, and the brute, with hoarse barking, gave chase. She looked around in dismay and terror, and her frightened scream rang through the cañon. At that moment she saw a man running toward her, and though he was distant yet, and might not arrive in time to save her from a frightful death, she, nevertheless, saw him with sufficient distinctness to recognize in him the handsome cavalier, whose portrait had fleetingly illumined one of her garter buckles. Yielding to an overpowering sense of strangely mixed emotions, she fell to the ground unconscious. *

When she had nearly recovered she had a vague impression of ineffable delight. No pains from lacerated flesh annoyed her. An uncertain recollection of passionate words of endearment poured into her ear and warm kisses pressed to her lips added an indescribable sweetness to her comfort. One of her small hands was clasped in that of a strong man. It was all too sweet, too luxurious, and with a sigh she drifted into darkness. *

Upon awaking she found herself in her own bed, with anxious schoolmates around her. "Ah, Muriel," her nearest friend said, "we are so glad to see you well again! Keep quiet, dear—it is all right now."

She looked around to find a certain face—it was not there. Then she sank into sleep. Presently she awoke. "Muriel," said her best friend, "a man has just called, who says that he has found something which he is sure you must have lost down near the cañon. He refuses to say what it is, and declares he must deliver it to you in person. I think, dear, it must be one of your garter-buckles, for when they brought you here and we undressed you one of them was missing, and—"

"Which one?" she eagerly asked.

"The left one."

"Thank God!" she said, sinking back upon her pillow and closing her eyes, while a smile broke over her face. And then she vaguely wondered whether accident had unclasped it or whether—

"Shall I let him in, Muriel?"

"Yes."

"But you are not strong enough, dear."

"Let him in."

"But, Muriel, he insists on seeing you alone!"

"Well, let him in, and leave us alone."

She closed her eyes. Her friend went away. The stranger entered. He paused at the threshold. He closed the door and slowly approached her bed.

"I fear you are asleep," he said. Her reply was a smile—she could not speak, and she dared not open her eyes. He came nearer and gently took her hand, "I have found something you lost," he said, "and I have come to restore it." He placed it in her hand, and by touch she recognized the lost garter! Ah, the sweetness and tenderness of the voice that addressed her. She opened her eyes. * * * A fearful scream brought her friend flying to her assistance; and there, sitting up in bed, she saw Muriel, her eyes staring wildly and her face drawn with terror, while near her, frightened and abashed, stood the man who had brought the lost garter—a dwarf he was, with a strangely grotesque face, enormous ears placed unevenly on his skull, two holes in his face for nostrils, fierce eyes, and a vast mouth with a hare-lip that disclosed hideous teeth. * * *

In the dead of the night frightful screams awake the sleepers in the great asylum for the insane at Napa, and the name of Muriel Arlington appears on the roll of the unfortunates there.

MY ADDENDUM.

And so ends my fair correspondent's sketch. Barring its feverishness and its somewhat too lively sensationalism I consider it a clever production.

It happens curiously enough that I am personally familiar with some of the facts upon which her



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